

# Major overhaul of Aberdeen's train station desirable but not easily done, mayor and senator say



Aberdeen city officials and State Sen. Robert Cassilly agree that the outdated Aberdeen Amtrak/MARC station needs major upgrades, but with funding sources in question, they also say such improvements likely will be a long time coming. (MATT BUTTON | AEGIS STAFF / Baltimore Sun)



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Aberdeen city leaders and their state senator agree the ancient Amtrak/MARC train station needs a major overhaul, but how to pay for it and when it will happen are questions for which they say there are no ready answers.

"That station should be a hallmark," Sen. Robert Cassilly said.

Mayor Patrick McGrady and city council members agree, but also admit making that happen will require a major selling job.

"It's complicated," McGrady said following Monday night's council meeting where Cassilly and the council briefly discussed the future of the station.

"There are so many agencies that have to be involved from the state and then Amtrak."

Cassilly said he came to Aberdeen to offer his "wholehearted support" for securing funding to upgrade the 73-year-old station at Route 40 and Bel Air Avenue, which most everyone has agreed at one time or another probably needs to be rebuilt.

"As these stations on MARC go, it's pretty bad," Cassilly said. "They need more parking, and the platforms need to be raised, and the building probably should be replaced."

Because passengers have to step up and down to board and exit the trains, Cassilly said, it's a safety issue, "particularly for older people."

"I rode these trains [MARC] from here every day," the senator, who once commuted from Harford County to the Washington, D.C., area, said. "We have to have something better. It's important for our residents, important for our relationship with the [Aberdeen] Proving Ground.

One issue, Cassilly said, is would more people use the station, if it were in better shape, "because that may be a key to getting the money to improve it."

Cassilly, a Republican, said prying money from the state to undertake a multi-million dollar upgrade of the station will be difficult, especially because they will be competing with interests in Baltimore City and the Washington suburban counties, whose mostly Democrat legislators vote as a bloc, "which I can't understand from the city's standpoint."

Still, he insisted, upgrading the station would have a regional benefit, especially considering Aberdeen's transit oriented development plan, or TOD, for its downtown, a revitalization plan previously endorsed by state planning officials and the city. The station is the focal point of that plan, previously dubbed "Station Square."

The city has already acquired some properties in the Station Square TOD district and is looking at taking over the former high school/community services building a block north of the station on Route 40, which Harford County intends to make available to Aberdeen for \$1.

MARC and its parent, Maryland Department of Transportation, own and maintain the station. State representatives met with city officials in May and outlined about \$200,000 in short-term improvements, including exterior and interior building repairs, as well as cleaning and painting, for which work is under way.

MDOT representatives acknowledged at the time the station is need of upgrades, but McGrady said that commitment only goes to immediate fixes.

Like Cassilly, the mayor said there will be concerns at the state level about spending millions to upgrade a facility which he said serves about 250 people a day.

McGrady said the first goal ought to be to provide additional parking, "because you aren't going to get more people to use the station if there's nowhere for them to park."

The mayor said the state already owns three acres on the east side of the station, but it will still cost \$1 million to build a surface parking lot.

"I think we have to approach this in steps," he explained, "and the parking is probably the most immediate need."

Aberdeen is one of two Harford County stops on the MARC's Penn Line that runs from Perryville to Baltimore and on to Union Station in Washington. The other station, in Edgewood, was rebuilt in the past four years at a cost of \$5 million.

Unlike other MARC stations north of Baltimore, Aberdeen also serves as a station stop for some of Amtrak's intercity Northeast Regional trains, five north and five south daily.

While the future of the station was being discussed at City Hall, about three blocks away, the station was a beehive of activity Monday evening around 7, although there are no places to eat or other shops, just waiting rooms and platforms. The southbound platform was crowded with people, most of whom were waiting for a MARC train that was running late.

Several passengers were frustrated when an Amtrak train stopped and a couple of people got off, but the conductors said they could not honor MARC tickets on that particular train.

"It's behind us," one of the conductors assured an inquisitive passenger; however, a few minutes later, an Amtrak Acela train sped through on the middle of three tracks running through the station. (Other than for emergencies, the Acelas don't stop in Aberdeen.)

Save for a few spaces near the northbound platform, the parking lot at the Aberdeen stop is on the Route 40 side of the station, snaked around the foundation of the East Bel Air overpass that looms over the station itself. The

overpass was built decades after the station itself in the era when Amtrak was eliminating grade crossings along the Northeast Corridor line.

Most of the parking spaces were occupied, until a northbound MARC train arrived around 7:15 p.m., about 40 minutes late, and a steady stream of passengers got off and went through the narrow tunnel under the tracks to the main lot. Several vehicles picking people up backed up along the narrow drive between the station and the overpass.

As the MARC pulled out, one of the hopeful waiting southbound passengers said to the others: "He has to go up to Perryville and turn around, then he'll be back to get us."